Announcer:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap:

In light of Black History Month in February, it’s a good time to check out the [Springfield-Greene County African American Heritage Trail](https://africanamericanheritagetrailsgf.org/). The trail winds its way throughout neighborhoods in midtown and downtown Springfield.

It marks several sites highlighting formerly unrecognized contributions made by people of African descent to the history of the community. I’m Emily Yeap.

One of the trail organizers is [Lyle Foster](https://search.missouristate.edu/people/lylefoster). He’s a business owner and faculty member in the [department of sociology and anthropology](https://soc-ant.missouristate.edu/) at Missouri State University. Foster joins me today to share more about this meaningful project.  

Lyle Foster:

The Springfield-Greene County African American Heritage Trail, at least in my opinion, is a really wonderful development in our community and it really is an opportunity to showcase the amazing contributions that have been provided by individuals of color here in Springfield and Greene County.

This was an outgrowth of a research project that was done a number of years ago in really looking at the African American history in Springfield and trying to see what was some of the unique and contributing factors to why our population is actually much lower than, for example, St. Louis and Kansas City, or Tulsa or Little Rock. Was there some significant event?

And as we went through that research project, we actually found some amazing historical events, locations, figures, that really, if you just came to the community today or in the last couple of decades, you may or may not know about it. And we thought that the legacy really needed to be preserved so that we could appreciate and recognize the contributions that have been made. But also, so people could have this sense of understanding from pride, and also learning and being educated about what life was like in past, present and how it contributes to the future.

Emily Yeap:

The goal is for the trail to have at least 20 sites.

Lyle Foster:

So, we have a volunteer group of citizens, and so, there’s a little bit of a vetting process in terms of a location or something has to have some historical significance to be considered “worthy of a site.” From that standpoint, we see the trail as a living organism. As far as we can see in the foreseeable future, additional sites can always be added.

And what’s been interesting over the last year, we’ve actually had people email us and even suggest and recommend sites. An example would be there’s been a lot of interests and recognition of Milly Sawyer and what her historical contribution was to Springfield and Greene County. So, people have asked us, “Can we have a marker to recognize what she contributed and the court case around her struggle for freedom?” And so, that’s something that we’re considering adding; a marker for Milly Sawyer.

The trail consists of a number of historical markers, and we have identified 22 locations to date in the city of Springfield, as well as in Greene County that we’ll actually have marked. And so, eight have been marked. Obviously these trail markers cost money, so we raise money/ We have a fund set up at the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, and as we raise money, we get those markers made.

Emily Yeap:

An existing site that is one of Foster’s favorites is Miss Alberta’s Hotel.

Lyle Foster:

I call it almost one of the earlier Airbnb's, but Miss Alberta’s Hotel was kind of a bed and breakfast and that was located at Benton and Chestnut Expressway. But historically it was the old Negro hospital back in the days of segregation. And Miss Alberta was very entrepreneurial and that’s what I love about her. When the Negro hospital was actually auctioned off, she paid $10,000 cash and turned it into essentially a bed and breakfast.

And one of the reasons why I mention that, many people heard about The Green Book primarily through the movie, but many people didn’t even recognize The Green Book during the era of segregation as African Americans traveled the highways and byways, including Route 66. Often times black people could not stay in the accomodations because of the laws, so, an entrepreneur out of New York City created, essentially, a directory, which was called The Green Book, to tell people of color where you could be welcomed to stay and eat. Miss Alberta’s in Springfield, Missouri, was listed in The Green Book. She had rooms that people could sleep in, and then, of course, she served meals.

Emily Yeap:

Markers that will be worked on for two new sites this spring include Jones Alley, a black business district located south of Chestnut Expressway, and Sherman Avenue, a professional district nicknamed Silver Stocking Lane. Foster encourages community members to take time to visit and appreciate the trail.

Lyle Foster:

So, our hope is people can walk the trail, they can drive the trail, and then there’ll be eventually signage that will kind of point people from one location to the next location so it’s a great family activity, educational, cultural activity.

And we see this under the current interests in diversity and inclusion and equity as a wonderful way to remind people that all types of people help to contribute to our community.

Emily Yeap:

For more information about the Heritage Trail, visit AfricanAmericanHeritageSGF.org. I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.